Republicans Fight Decade-Old Image as

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If Democrats were looking for a political symbol they could use against Republicans, they could hardly have found one more compelling than the image of children denied a plate of hot food.

More than a decade after they embarrassed Republicans for proposing ketchup be considered a vegetable, Democrats are once more focusing on school lunches as a metaphor for a mean-spirited Republican agenda. For a week, Democrats have been waving ketchup bottles to protest the GOP proposal to replace the 49-year-old federal lunch program with direct payments to the states.

And today, President Clinton is scheduled to visit a Montgomery County elementary school for lunch.

Suddenly, Republicans are on the defensive. In recent days they have gathered for strategy sessions, in one case calling in a political consultant, to ponder how they can best answer the criticism.

"We are certainly concerned we are losing the spin war," said Glen Bolger of the GOP polling firm, Public Opinion Strategies. "Every time in focus groups we test the question of school lunches, noting that, spending on lunches will increase 4 percent, people say, 'Wow, I didn't know that.' The question is, can we overcome the easy but disingenuous message of Democrats?"

Emergence of school lunches as a flashpoint for the partisan warfare in Washington, amid titanic disagreements over the role of government and other philosophical issues, is a reminder of how hard it is to cut social programs. But it also raises the question of whether Republicans anticipated the bitter criticism their school lunch plan would inspire.

"Anytime you attempt to change, I guarantee you'll get criticism," said Rep. William F. Goodling (R-Pa), chairman of the Economic and Educational Opportunities Committee, which last month voted to replace the $4.9 billion school lunch program with direct cash payments to the states. "Everybody fears change."

In fact, Republicans are fuming at what they say is an unfair attack on school lunches, arguing they have not voted to cut spending on the school lunch program, just to slow its growth

School Lunch Foes

and remove an unneeded layer of bureaucracy. The committee approved a 4.5 percent annual funding increase, while congressional budget officials predicted the program would otherwise have grown 5.3 percent each year.

But some Republicans seemed caught off guard by the barrage of criticism.

"The debate is getting away from us," said a GOP strategist enlisted to help the House leadership. "There are too many things happening in too many places and these guys are not talking enough to one another to have a legislative strategy, much less a communications strategy. We are being forced to answer all kinds of exaggerations that are moving into the public domain without challenge."

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GOP Fights 'Spin War' on School Lunch Plan

GOP, From A23

White House pollster Stanley Greenberg said in a breakfast with reporters yesterday that his and other polls show a 20 percent increase in people who think the Republicans are going too far in efforts to cut the budget, what he called "a quite dramatic change" since the elections. He said House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), as a personification of GOP budget plans, is seen by an increasing number as "a bull in a china closet."

"It was clearly a major miscalculation by them," said Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), a leading opponent of the proposal. "The first cuts that they make are directed at children who need the school lunch. . . . What they've created here for themselves is a very serious compassion gap."

Miller and other critics argue that, despite the annual increase in spending approved by Republicans, funding will in effect be cut because it will not grow at the same pace as the number of eligible children.

GOP strategist William Kristol said failure to respond effectively on the school lunch issue may have hurt House Republicans. He went on to say there will probably be "lots of tactical blunders and one or two day stories about school lunches" but "at the end of the day, strategically, the Republicans are in the right position" in trying to cut spending.

The notion of consolidating school lunches and other nutrition programs into a block grant to the states was proposed as a single paragraph in the GOP "Contract With America." While Republicans on the House Agriculture Committee persuaded party leadership to exempt food stamps from the block grant, programs for the other nutritional programs went ahead.

"No one had thought about it," said Robert J. Fersh, president of the Food Research & Action Center, a liberal lobbying organization opposed to cutbacks in nutrition programs. "Those who really know the program probably could have predicted the reaction would be huge."

But the focus on school lunches also illustrates what Republicans learned in last year's health care debate: it is easier for the party out of power to select the issues it chooses to attack.

The Republican strategist, who worked for former Republican administrations, said the Democrats now "have the luxury we used to have of picking off slivers of stuff we are doing and shooting it down . . . in a way that makes it look like what we're doing up here is cruel, heartless and extreme," rather than looking at the overall program.

Yesterday, in a CBS debate with House Majority Leader Richard K. Armey (R-Tex.), White House Chief of Staff Leon E. Panetta once more defined the GOP agenda as one that hurts children. "What you've seen over the last few weeks is almost a full-scale assault on kids. . . . They're talking about cutting school lunch programs in this country that serve 26 million kids."

Armey responded by saying, "we are not cutting school lunches. . . . And Leon knows that, and it's just flat wrong for him to misrepresent it this way."